



Rediscovering a lost treasure in the East Usambaras, Tanzania

Norbert J. Cordeiro

We arrived at Kwamkole on a blistering hot afternoon. The road from the junction towards the village had been a roller-coaster ride with a series of exciting dips in the puddles of invisible pot-holes. Kwamkole was one of the few villages nestling in a valley almost entirely enveloped by ranges that were partially forested. It was here that we were warmly welcomed by the local villagers, foresters and Aidano Makange of the Kambai Forest Conservation Project. Aidano helped make the otherwise lengthy bureaucratic obligations seem like a brief visit to the dentist. After fulfilling such duties, we viewed our eventual destination: covered in the forest that comprises Lutindi Forest Reserve, Mount Nilo burst through the darkening sky.

At dawn on 2 August, we hastily packed our gear in anticipation of the three hour hike through steep terrain which took us through several *shambas* (farms). Eventually, at roughly midday, we were greeted by the noisy chatter of greenbulbs at the forest edge. Although Loveridge¹ and Moreau's² collectors had worked in the Lutindi area, having finally reached the lush forest, our team (Jacob Kiure, Ernesti Tarimo, Jonas Timothy, Frank Baele and myself), were still excited to conduct an ornithological survey in this neck of the biologically rich Usambara Mountains for the first time in 63 years.

The Usambaras are part of the 'Eastern Arc' chain of mountains that extend from south-east Kenya to southern Tanzania. In addition to being centres of endemism for many plants and animals, these mountains are also important sites for several globally threatened and near-threatened birds^{3,4}. Despite considerable effort devoted to the East Usambara avifauna, most research has been centred near Amani^{2,5,6} where Reg Moreau resided from 1928 to 1946 and where Simon Stuart followed suit in the late 1970s-early 1980s⁷.

It was at Amani that the rare Tanzania Mountain Weaver *Ploceus nicolli* was last reported in 1931¹, and has remained elusive despite subsequent searches there and at other sites in the East Usambaras^{8,9}. This weaver was hence believed to be extinct in the area⁹⁻¹¹ until our recent survey of Mt Nilo. Strangely enough, it was one of the first birds seen in the forest shortly after midday on 2 August at around 1250m. Jacob, Ernesti and Jonas

had walked ahead, disturbing a feeding party that beckoned for Frank's and my attention. As we watched the Square-tailed Drongo *Dicrurus ludwigii* and a few species of greenbulbs, my eyes were attracted to what seemed to be woodpeckers some distance from the flock. I focused my binoculars and, realising the birds were weavers, excitedly called out the characteristics of an olive head, yellow in front of the bill and a pale iris - all indications of a species I had not previously come across. The pair of weavers were gleaning the epiphytes and only gave us a few moments of their time.

We had to come back to visit this site again and thus camped in dense forest near a river, only 15 minutes away from the 'weaver site'. During our surveys of the forest at 1350 m, through ringing and direct observation, we managed to record several of the east coast escarpment endemics, but none of the rarer birds. Only during our walks through the highly disturbed forest in the public land, did we come across the Banded Green *Anthreptes rubritorques* and Uluguru Violet-backed Sunbird *A. neglectus*. The weavers, however, continually eluded us.

After a few days Jacob, Ernesti and I hiked to the summit at 1500 m to search for additional species. On our last day, Jonas arrived to let us know of owls calling near our first camp; his imitations were indicative of the rare Usambara Eagle Owl *Bubo vosseleri*. We all plodded down that day, breaking two camps, setting a new camp in the disturbed forest at 1250 m, and cutting several net rides. Tired but with a good meal of *ugali* (maize-meal) and beans, we dozed off amidst the noisy hyraxes and chorus of treefrogs and crickets. At 04.00hr an owl began to call from dense forest across the ridge from our camp, and Jacob and I strained our ears to the welcoming sounds of the Usambara Eagle Owl. Just before dawn broke that same morning, the Southern Banded Snake Eagle *Circaetus fasciolatus* delivered its 'good morning' in a series of *ka ka keous*.

We had spent several days searching desperately for the weaver and hoping for the Amani Sunbird *A. pallidigaster* amongst other rarities. On the eve of the last day, Frank, Ernesti, Jacob and I explored the forest edge along a ridge for about two hours. Although the occasional Banded Green Sunbird made its appear-

ance, nothing unusual seemed to be around, and we turned to head back to camp for the last time, only to be drawn to strange calls that were not immediately recognisable. As the team continued down, I glimpsed a group of four birds apparently responsible for the calls fly to new perches and, observing the chestnut wash on the chest of one individual, I hastily beckoned the others back. We watched the weavers in awe for 3-5 minutes and the whole chaotic business - fumbling with the scope, laughter and excitement - was caught on tape together with the weavers' twittering! It was a wonderful culmination to our survey and Stuart's¹⁰ earlier prediction that the Tanzania Mountain Weaver might occur at Mt Nilo was finally proven.

Several birds, including such rarities as Swynnerton's Forest Robin *Swynnertonia swynnertoni*, East Coast Akalat *Sheppardia gunningi* and the Sokoke Scops Owl *Otus irenae*, have recently been added to the East Usambara list¹² making the forests one of the highest conservation priorities in Africa. This is probably a testament to the value of exploring the many patches beyond Amani where many more sites await even the most basic of surveys. The Tanzania Mountain Weaver is probably an easily overlooked species and may occur not only in more sites in the East Usambaras, but also other little-explored 'Eastern Arc' mountains. With the development of the Important Bird Areas programme in Tanzania, such surveys should illuminate further details on many of Africa's elusive and rare birds.

This study was sponsored by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the UK Partner of BirdLife. Many thanks to Dr Neil Burgess and to Neil and Liz Baker for their support. Mr MIL Katigula kindly provided permission to visit the Usambaras. ☺

References

1. Friedmann, H. 1928. A collection of birds from the Uluguru and Usambara Mountains, Tanganyika Territory. *Ibis* 12(4): 74-99.
2. Sclater, W.L. and Moreau, R.E. 1932-33. Taxonomic field notes on some birds of north-eastern Tanganyika Territory. *Ibis* (13)2: 487-522, 656-683; (13)3: 1-33, 187-219, 399-440.
3. Collar, N.J. and Stuart, S.N. 1985. *Threatened birds of Africa and related islands: The ICBP/IUCN Red Data Book, Part 1*. Cambridge: International Council for Bird Preservation.
4. Collar, N.J. and Stuart, S.N. 1988. *Key forests for threatened birds of Africa and related Islands*. Cambridge: International Council for Bird Preservation.
5. Moreau, R.E. 1935. A synecological study of Usambara, Tanganyika Territory, with particular reference to birds. *Journal of Ecology* 23: 1-43.
6. Moreau, R.E. 1940. Distributional notes on East African birds. *Ibis* 14(4): 454-463.
7. Stuart, S.N. 1983. *Biogeographical and ecological aspects of forest bird communities in Eastern Africa*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge.
8. Stuart, S.N. and van der Willigen, T.A. (eds) 1979. *Report of the Cambridge Ecological Expedition to Tanzania, 1978*. Unpublished manuscript.
9. Evans, T.D. and Anderson, G.Q.Q. (eds) 1992. *A wildlife survey of the East Usambara and Ukaguru Mountains, Tanzania*. ICBP Study Report No. 53. Cambridge: International Council for Bird Preservation.
10. Stuart, S.N. 1989. The forest bird fauna of the East Usambara Mountains. In Hamilton, A.C. and Bensted-Smith, R. (eds) *Forest Conservation in the East Usambara Mountains, Tanzania*. Gland and Cambridge: IUCN.
11. Tye, A. 1993. Forest and bird conservation in the East Usambara Mountains, north-east Tanzania. In Wilson, R.T. (ed). *Birds and the African Environment: Proceedings of the Eight Pan-African Ornithological Congress. Annales Museum Royal de l'Afrique Centrale (Zoologie)* 268: 287-292.
12. Hipkiss, A.J., Watson, L.G. and Evans, T.D. 1994. The Cambridge-Tanzania Rainforest Project 1992: Brief account of ornithological results and conservation proposals. *Ibis* 136: 107-108.

3145 Canfield Avenue, No. 13, Los Angeles, CA 90034, USA.

Little Blue Heron *Egretta caerulea* in South Africa

Richard K. Brooke^a & David T. Parkin^b

During April 1992, DTP was a visiting lecturer at the Percy Fitzpatrick Institute for African Ornithology where RKB is librarian. On the weekend of 10-12 April, we spent a couple of days birdwatching northwards from Cape Town up the west coast of Cape Province. On Saturday 11 April, we decided to spend a couple of

hours watching the waders on the shore adjacent to the road bridge at Velddrif. Within a couple of minutes of arriving, DTP noticed a grey egret that appeared different from the other birds that were present. He drew RKB's attention to it, who also recognised it as a species unfamiliar to him. We watched the bird for about 30